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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews research on teaching practicums and describes research-based efforts of the University of Waikato in New Zealand to make the practicum component more effective. Changes in the practicum component being implemented include clarifying the relationship between theory and practice; improving the communication among schools, colleges, and students; outlining the logical development of expectations for each practice teaching requirement; providing training for associate teachers; improving assessment of the practicum; and establishing the Professional Studies Department. Findings suggest that the blend of the practicum incorporated within professional practice courses produces an effective mix of theory and practice and that improvements to this model will bring about a professionally more sound development than the school-based initial teacher education models being proposed elsewhere. (JDD)

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THE TEACHING PRACTICUM AT WAIKATO: Background Developments and Issues

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THE TEACHING PRACTICUM AT WAIKATO:

Background Developments and Issues

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Abstract

The teaching practicum has long been regarded as an essential and extremely important component of the teacher education programme in New Zealand, as indeed it has in other parts of the world. Proponents of school-based initial teacher education programmes (which are a recent development in teacher education in England) question the value of the traditional 'teaching section' as we know it in Australia and New Zealand, as being insufficient in terms of practical training and in lacking coherence over the full length of a programme. The effectiveness of the traditional section has been the subject of research at the University of Waikato, sporadically, from the late 1980's through to the present. This paper reviews the research which bears specifically on the Waikato practicum, drawing together strands of pervasive issues and perceived strengths. Some of the questions and issues raised set the scene for our most recent research efforts and practices relating to the practicum in the School of Education which will be discussed in following papers. Our findings would suggest that our blend of the practicum incorporated within professional practice courses produces an effective mix of theory and practice, and that improvements to this model will be a professionally sounder development than the school-based initial teacher education models being proposed elsewhere.

The amalgamation of Hamilton Teachers' College with the University of Waikato in January 1991 made legitimate the defacto union that had developed over a period of years. This development was fairly inevitable given that the two institutions shared the same campus and co-taught the Bachelor of Education degree. The School of Education of the University of Waikato, the off-spring of this union is responsible for initial teacher education in early childhood, primary and secondary teaching. Students in the primary and early childhood programmes study for a concurrent Teaching Diploma and B.Ed. though some students can opt out at the end of the third year with a diploma qualification only. The secondary programme offers a add-on one year Diploma of Teaching course to graduates and a concurrent 5 year B.Ed. / Dip Tch. and other degree. This paper deals with the primary programme only.

The teaching practice element of the primary programme -also referred to as the practicum, section and TRE (teaching related experience) - has been maintained under the amalgamation as an important part of the preparation of teachers. As yet, the length, administration and nature of the practicum has been unaffected by the amalgamation process, but funding cuts to universities may put this relatively expensive element of the programme under threat. In New Zealand there is an expectation and general agreement among all six colleges of education that the minimum practical in-school component of the Diploma of teaching should be 500 hours. Institutions vary with respect to how the 500 or so hours are divided up and spread over the three years. The basic model of the practicum has changed little from when teacher training institutions were set up in the early part of this century. A student (or more rarely, two students) is placed with an associate teacher for a proscribed period and carries out tasks set by the institution and also 'learns the ropes' of classroom routines and management. The 'section' is supervised by a college lecturer who observes the student teach and who offers feedback or criticism of the performance. Students have other school experiences in Normal Schools situated close to the institution. These experiences are directly related to class work and are of short term duration.

There is no doubt that in the eyes of the students the practicum is extremely important and is very highly valued (eg. McKinnon, 1989; Renwick, 1992). Some students in

Renwick's study said that the teaching practice was "the most significant way in which their training had helped them to become effective classroom teachers" (p.60). There are suggestions however that this may be something of a myth. Students frequently report that their experiences were less than satisfactory because of problems with associate teachers, difficult classes, college lecturers, and external pressures. Calder (1989) found that whilst most students found teaching practice to be a satisfying and valuable experience, some did not find it so and even went so far as to hide problems from their peers in case they should be seen as failures.

The actual value and effectiveness of the practicum has been questioned by several researchers. Tinning (1984) in an aptly titled article "All that Glitters is not Gold", questioned the myth and the reality of the practicum in an Australian institution. Ramsay and Battersby (1989) found that students often had difficulty relating what was taught in college courses to everyday classroom practice. They even recorded instances of students being told by their associate teachers to forget the teaching tasks set by college with the implication that they were not part of the 'real world' of the classroom. That students were sometimes exposed to poor models was also revealed when some reported that associates did not plan in depth, demonstrated teacher directed programmes and outdated methodology.

In the 1970's, responding to calls from the teaching profession, the government of the day set up a committee under the chairmanship of professor Clem Hill of Massey University to conduct a major review of teacher education. The report published by the committee in 1979, 'New Zealand Review of Teacher Training' drew attention to specific problems with the practical aspects of teacher training. In particular, they pointed to a lack of coherence and articulation in the programme.

"...a lack of close co-ordination between the colleges and the schools, a lack of appreciation by many associate teachers of the 'aims' of the section, and a lack of co-ordination between the stage of college courses and what the student does in schools."
(Department of Education, 1979, p33.)

The Review of Teacher Training appeared to have had very little impact on education policy following its publication. Mr Les Gander, the Minister of Education who instigated the review lost favour with Prime Minister Muldoon and anyway lost his seat in the 1981 election. Perhaps that had something to do with lack of official interest, with the result that the impetus for reform in teacher education was largely lost, only to be revived again in the late eighties when the major educational reforms were being implemented.

In 1987, the Department of Education contracted Peter Ramsay of Waikato University and David Battersby of Massey to undertake a major research programme into the in-school teacher training programmes in New Zealand. These researchers adopted a case-study approach of each of the teacher training institutions (Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin). Separate reports were published as occasional papers dealing with each institution and a separate final report was also published. The methodology involved interviews with key players (College administrators and staff, students, associate teachers and school principals, and also utilised questionnaires with larger population samples. The researchers found that college staff invariably cited the closing of the theory - practice gap as one of the main purposes of the practicum. Students were expected to relate to their practice the theoretical issues of learning and curriculum implementation that they learned in college. Associate teachers, however, 'tended to have limited knowledge of the underlying principles and theories introduced to students in their college courses' (Ramsay and Battersby, Final Report, p.11). Echoing the Hill report, the researchers were seriously concerned about the lack of communication and understanding between school and college. They found that the college aims for the section were often not met in practice.

"Regrettably, we have to report, basing our conclusion on statements from trainees, associate teachers and from some of the teachers college staff as well, that few if any of the experiences have hit what we consider to be the target. Our consideration of this theory-practice dichotomy has led us to the conclusion that trainees in all of the colleges have a large number of isolated skills, techniques and pieces of knowledge which are not brought together systematically into logical patterns. Moreover, only rarely were trainees encouraged to view what they observed (or had been told) in a critical, reflective manner." (ibid p.11)

Other purposes for the section were identified by the participants of this research. It was seen as a major socialisation agent, socialising the students into the culture of the profession. It provided an opportunity for skills which could not be realistically taught at college to be practised. It confirmed vocational choice (or otherwise), and it provided the student with strong motivation in that working with real children in classrooms was far more satisfying than simply learning about them at college. In their conclusion, the researchers noted that while there were many positive aspects of the programme at Hamilton, there were some areas of concern.

1. The programme at Hamilton was practice driven. By this it was meant that the practicum assumed tremendous importance in the eyes of students, associate teachers and college staff. This had the effect of down-grading the in-college theoretical components. It concerned the researchers that the theory aspect of the theory-practice dichotomy was seriously undervalued. Students and associate teachers had difficulty in relating theory to practice.
2. Communication, understanding and trust between colleges and school left a lot to be desired.
3. In all of the colleges concern was expressed about the suitability of some associate teachers. Some of them did not present the students with good role models with respect to planning and familiarity with up to date teaching methods and curricula.
4. Students and associate teachers expressed some concern about the suitability of some college staff for the supervisory role.
5. Students were concerned about the assessment of their practicum. They reported that supervising lecturers lacked consistency with their visiting procedures, expectations of students and even with their perceptions of their own role.

Like the Hill Report of 1979, the Ramsay and Battersby research seemed to have little impact at the national level. This was possibly because of the welter of reforms taking place as part of Tomorrow's Schools. Individual institutions, however, could pick up on their own section of the research try to put their own house in order with respect to the practicum.

At the School of Education in Hamilton we were extremely fortunate that Professor Peter Ramsay was appointed Associate Dean of the new school and thus was a member of the amalgamation implementation team which was appointed for a period of three years to direct the amalgamation process. With his own, still immediate research experience, he was very supportive of moves that were made to strengthen the practicum. One of the implications of amalgamation was that the whole B.Ed. programme and department structures had to be reviewed. This review made available the opportunity to put right many of the perceived faults of the practicum. Some of the major developments are discussed below.

1. The relationship between theory and practice.

For the first time the practicum became embedded in specific courses. Four core courses (Professional Practice I through IV) were introduced and the practicum became an assessed part of each course. This had the effect of giving the practicum degree status. The tutors for Prof. Prac. I were drawn from several departments so that coordination and integration of curriculum requirements were made possible. The tutors also adopted a mentoring role and coordinated all aspects of the normal school experiences for their students. They were thus able to make specific the links between theory taught at college and the practical aspects of teaching. To give status and recognition to these key staff members, the management committee granted a .2 time allowance. In the in-college component students were helped to develop personal portfolios which encouraged them to become reflective practitioners.

2. Improving the communication between schools, college and students.

Several moves were made to bring about positive change in this area. First the written information supplied to schools and students was reviewed. Three new documents were developed: the Professional Practice Handbook, the Student Profile and Report Form and the Associate Teacher Information Folder. Early feedback from the Calder, Faire and Schon research (the subject of the second paper in this series) indicated that the printed information given to students was confusing, incomplete and full of jargon, so often they did not understand the requirements held out for them. The Professional Practice Handbook was changed in style and made more user friendly. It included cartoons to lighten it with humour yet still make important points. Clear instructions about planning and writing of objectives, record keeping and outlines of curriculum and professional tasks were included. The number and nature of the tasks was more controlled and kept in proportion so that they did not completely swamp the student. Under the leadership of the professional practice team a number of associate teachers and lecturing staff worked cooperatively to produce a set of guidelines for associate teachers. This clarified their role as part of a team with a common goal - the professional development of the student. This document included a checklist of the things the student was expected to do in each week of the section. It also included a weekly planner so that student and associate together could map out a long term developmental plan for the section. The Student Profile and Report Form provided information to the associate of the students history with respect to previous teaching practice and college courses. The student (who completes this section of the form) also identifies the competencies he or she wishes to focus on during the practicum. Finally, this form includes the associate teacher report form with details of the criteria to be used as a basis for making judgements about student performance over the section.

In another move to improve communication, the role of the professional practice liaison team was reviewed. This group of 5 lecturing staff work with the professional practice coordinator to administer the practicum. Each member of the team has a .2 time allowance to allow them to work effectively with schools in a particular geographic area. Their duties include briefing the students and associate teachers in their area about the requirements for the section. They put considerable effort into maintaining good public relations with their schools and they are available on call to attend to any problems that may arise.

3. Articulation and logical development of expectations for each section

The four Professional Practice courses were developed so that several strands were continued each year at a more advanced stage. The 'strands' included learning and teaching (theory), biculturalism, equity, professionalism, reflection, assessment and teaching practice. The course content then set a platform for each of the three major teaching practice requirements.

4. Training for Associate Teachers

Moves to up-skill associate teachers included introducing an Advanced Study for Teachers course (these courses form an alternative to the university degree route for advanced qualifications for teachers). This course was optional and there were political

difficulties in attempting to make the course a requirement for associate teacher status. The whole business of the selection of associate teachers was and is a sensitive issue. Prior to the administrative reforms this was one of the functions of the inspectors of schools. Now each institution has to negotiate directly with schools to find teachers willing to be associates. Associates are paid for having students so the colleges have the right to impose requirements, but such negotiations require considerable skill and diplomacy because of the shortage of associates.

5. The Assessment of the Practicum

Until 1990, students graduating from Teachers Colleges were guaranteed places in schools which would allow them to complete their probationary period leading to certification. This placement was organised by the local education boards. With the demise of the boards under the administration reforms, this automatic right to placement ended and students had to apply for teaching positions on the open market. This had the effect of making the practicum even more important because the students' final report was based almost entirely on their performance on the final practicum (a separate record of achievement listed their academic record). The lecturer responsible for the writing of the final report was the lecturer who supervised the third year teaching practice. To strengthen the validity of the report, the lecturer was expected to make three observational visits in place of the single visit which was the norm previously. The visits were expected to be longer and more thorough and the lecturing staff were aware that their reports had to be fair, valid and able to be substantiated. The final report was often used by students as part of their curriculum vitae. School principals impressed with a student's performance would often be in a position to offer employment. All of this had the effect of placing great stress on the student to have a successful section and on the supervising lecturers to make their assessments accurate and valid. The developments described above have done little to address the problem noted earlier - that the programme at Hamilton tended to be practice driven.

6. The Professional Studies Department

As a result of the amalgamation a new department was instituted. This department replaced the Education Department of the previous Hamilton Teachers College. The new department had as one of its chief responsibilities oversight of the new professional practice courses. Most of the improvements to the practicum mentioned in this paper were initiated by the department in close cooperation with the director of primary programmes. The department also adopted the practicum as the area where the major research effort would be made. The following papers in this multi-paper session report on the findings of some of this research.

Conclusion.

A considerable effort has been made over some years to make more effective the practicum component of teacher education at Waikato University. A research programme in place ensures that changes are informed changes rather than arbitrary tinkering. Feedback from students and teachers is consistently encouraging and it would appear that some success is emerging in the practicum becoming more developmental and coherent. There is still some way to go in developing a truly team approach among the triad of student, associate teacher and college lecturer. The papers that follow will show what recent progress has been made and point to new directions for further research. We are convinced that this track will be far more fruitful in the goal of preparing effective teachers than the school-based initial teacher education developments taking place in Britain at present.

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